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Paper from "The Spectator"

Showing That Paris Set the Standard of Fashion Even As Long Ago
As Two Hundred Years

Thursday, January 17, 1711-12.

—fas est ab hoste doceri.

Ovid, Met. lib. 4, 488.

Receive instruction from an enemy.

I presume I need not inform the polite part of my readers, that before our correspondence with France was unhappily interrupted by the war, our ladies had all their fashions from thence; which the milliners took care to furnish them with by means of a jointed baby, that came regularly over once a month, habited after the manner of the most eminent toasts in Paris.

I am credibly informed, that, even in the hottest time of the war, the sex made several efforts, and raised large contributions towards the importation of this wooden mademoiselle.

Whether the vessel they set out was lost or taken, or whether its cargo was seized on by the officers of the custom-house as a piece of contraband good, I have not yet been able to learn; it is however certain that their first attempts were without success, to the no small disappointment of our whole female world; but as their constancy and application, in a matter of so great importance, can never be sufficiently commended, so I am glad to find, that, in spite of all opposition, they have at length carried their point, of which I received advice by the two following letters:

'Mr. Spectator,

'I am so great a lover of whatever is French, that I lately discarded an humble admirer because he neither spoke that tongue nor drank claret. I have long bewailed in secret the calamities of my sex during the war, in all which time we have laboured under the insupportable inventions of English tire-women, who, though they sometimes copy indifferently well, can never compose with that "gout" they do in France.

'I was almost in despair of ever more seeing a model from that dear country, when last Sunday I overheard a lady in the next pew to me whisper another, that at the Seven Stars in King-street, Covent-Garden, there was a mademoiselle completed just come from Paris.

'I was in the utmost impatience during the remaining part of the service, and as soon as ever it was over, having learnt the milliner's "adresse," I went directly to her house in King-street, but was told that the French lady was at a person of quality's in Pall-mall, and would not be back again till very late that night. I was therefore obliged to renew my visit early this morning, and had then a full view of the dear moppet from head to foot.

'You cannot imagine, worthy sir, how ridiculously I find we have all been trussed up during the war, and how infinitely the French dress excels our. The mantua has no leads in the sleeves, and I hope we are not lighter than the French ladies, so as to want

that kind of ballast: the petticoat has no whalebone, but sits with an air altogether gallant and degagé: the coiffure is inexpressibly pretty, and, in short, the whole dress has a thousand beauties in it which I would not have as yet made too public.

'I thought fit, however, to give you this notice, that you may not be surprised at my appearing à la mode de Paris on the next birth-night.

'I am, Sir, your humble servant,
'Teraminta.'

Within an hour after I had read this letter, I received another from the owner of the puppet.

'Sir,

'On Saturday last, being the 12th instant, there arrived at my house in King-street, Covent-garden, a French baby for the year 1712. I have taken the utmost care to have her dressed by the most celebrated tire-women and mantua-makers in Paris, and do not find that I have any reason to be sorry for the expense I have been at in her clothes and importation; however, as I know no person who is so good a judge of dress as yourself, if you please to call at my house in your way to the city, and take a view of her, I promise to amend whatever you shall disapprove in your next paper, before I exhibit her as a pattern to the public.

'I am, Sir,

'your most humble admirer,
'and most obedient servant,
'Betty Cross-stich.'

As I am willing to do anything in reason for the service of my countrywomen, I went last night to the house of the above-mentioned Mrs. Cross-stich. As soon as I entered, the maid of the shop, who, I suppose, was prepared for my coming, without asking me any questions, introduced me to

the little damsel, and ran away to call her mistress.

The puppet was dressed in a cherry-coloured gown and petticoat, with a short working apron over it, which discovered her shape to the most advantage. Her hair was cut and divided very prettily, with several ribands stuck up and down in it. The milliner assured me, that her complexion was such as worn by all the ladies of the best fashion in Paris. Her head was extremely high, on which subject having long since declared my sentiments, I shall say nothing more to it at present. I was also offended at a small patch she wore on her breast, which I cannot suppose is placed there with any good design.

Her necklace was of an immoderate length, being tied before in such a manner that the two ends hung down to her girdle; but whether these supply the place of kissing-strings in our enemy's country, and whether our British ladies have any occasion for them, I shall leave to their serious consideration.

After having observed the particulars of her dress, as I was taking a view of it altogether, the shop-maid, who is a pert wench, told me that mademoiselle had something very curious in the tying of her garters; but as I pay a due respect even to a pair of sticks when they are under petticoats, I did not examine into that particular. Upon the whole I was well enough pleased with the appearance of this gay lady, and the more so because she was not talkative, a quality very rarely to be met with in the rest of her countrywomen.

As I was taking my leave, the mil-

liner farther informed me, that with the assistance of a watch-maker who was her neighbour, and the ingenious Mr. Powell, she had also contrived another puppet, which by the help of several little springs to be wound up within it, could move all its limbs; and that she had sent it over to her correspondent in Paris to be taught the various leanings and bendings of the head, the risings of the bosom, the courtesy and recovery, the genteel

trip, and the agreeable jet, as they are now practiced at the Court of France.

She added that she hoped she might depend upon having my encouragement as soon as it arrived; but as this was a petition of too great importance to be answered extempore, I left her without a reply, and made the best of my way to Will Honeycomb's lodgings, without whose advice I never communicate anything to the public of this nature.